

Safety for Special Needs Children

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Safety is one of the most important concerns with raising children, but it becomes vital if one of your children has special needs. Children with special needs can present special *safety* needs too. Children, who suffer from any type of disability, whether it is mental, physical or emotional, will tend to suffer accidents at a higher rate. Your child's disability will determine what types of issues to be aware of. There are several areas to consider when taking safety precautions.

To provide an example of a safety concern, I would like to share a personal experience with you. My son has an Autism Spectrum Disorder and use to wander when he was between the ages of 2 and 6. There were times that he would get up during the night and go out of the front door. We were lucky that we lived in an apartment building with a stairwell and my son would go up to our neighbor's apartment instead of out. However, after just few times of this happening we installed a key chain lock on the door above his reach. There was one incident however when he was 3 and I was in the kitchen cooking dinner. It was a beautiful day in August and we had the balcony door open. There were three other adults in the house and my 14 year old son who was sitting right next to the front door. When I didn't see my 3 year old in the living room I thought he was in his room down the hallway. I went to his room and it was empty. I began calling his name and asking other family members if they knew where he was. Everyone had thought he was in his room. We began searching the whole house and calling his name. At first I thought he might be hiding in a closet or under a bed or something. It was beginning to get dark out and when we realized that he wasn't in the house I began to panic. I asked my older son who was sitting next to the front door if he saw his brother go past him out of the house. He said "no." Then I remembered the balcony door. I thought it was a long shot that he would have gone over the balcony because it is a bit of a drop to the ground. But since we lived on the first floor, it WAS possible. My sister-in-law and I both FLEW outside and went in each direction. My son was about a block down the street, walking in the middle of the street. Once again, we were lucky we lived in a quiet neighborhood. I ran and snatched him up and I asked him where he thought he was going. He said, "To see my sister." His sister had gone to the youth center up the street earlier that afternoon.

My son was very quick with little sense of danger. He was like a little Houdini and would climb over, under or through anything. We had to always keep our eyes on him and put safety measures in place that would help ensure he didn't escape. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE YOUR KIDS ABILITY TO GET OUT.

In situations where a child suffers from Autism or an Autism Spectrum Disorder, this brings a whole new risk factor to child safety. Autistic kids tend to wander. Some may not respond to their names being called. Some may be too trusting of strangers. Some may be awake at night when the rest of the house is sleeping. Whatever the issue, keeping your autistic child safe can be a nightmare. Drowning, prolonged exposure, and other wandering-related factors remain among the top causes of death within the autism population. Here are a few tools that may help:

→ Secure your home by installing some of the following: secure dead bolt locks that require keys from both sides, a home security alarm system, inexpensive battery-operated alarms on doors and windows, hook and eye locks on all doors above your child's reach, fencing your yard, adhering printable STOP signs to doors, windows and other exits.

- Consider a tracking device. Check with your local law enforcement for Project Lifesaver or LoJack SafetyNet services. These tracking devices are worn on the wrist or ankle and locate the individual through radio frequency. Various GPS tracking systems are also available.
- Consider an ID bracelet that includes your name, telephone numbers and other important information. They may also state your child's disability.
- Teach your child to swim. However, fence your pool if you own one, using gates that self-latch higher than your child's reach. When not in use, remove all toys and or items of interest. Neighbors with pools should be made aware of these safety precautions and your child's tendency to wonder.
- Alert your neighbors. Knowing your neighbors can help reduce the risks associated with wandering.
- Provide first responders with key information before an incident occurs.

Preparing for a wandering incident may seem extreme for some families. Yet, for many other families, addressing wandering the first time can be the worst time. Anyone with a child with autism should complete a first responder alert form that can be copied and carried with you at all times. Keep one at home, in your car, in your purse or wallet, or affixed to a child's car seat. Parents should also consider having a Family Wandering Emergency Plan (FWEP) with pertinent information about your child.

There are also other areas to consider when planning for the safety of your special needs child. In the area of fire safety and prevention, parents of children who are vision or hearing impaired should have safety aids installed in their house. Here are some fire safety tips:

- Contact your local Fire Department and explain any special circumstances you have.
- Consider a medical alert device for your child, his backpack or clothing.
- Create visual aids above doors to highlight exit routes.
- There should be a house map with the exits marked.
- Children should know the Evacuation Plan and practice a fire alarm drill to make them become more comfortable in the event of a real fire. Techniques should include feeling along walls to get to safety.
- Fire extinguishers should be placed on every level of the house.
- Flashing or vibrating smoke alarms should be installed.
- For children that cannot communicate verbally keep a whistle, bell or alarm near your child's bed to alert others to danger.

For ALL children, falls are the number one unintentional injury. As a parent or caregiver of a child with special needs, you might have to make physical modifications in your home to ensure your child's safety. However, here are some basic steps you can take to help prevent falls.

- Install secure handrails and grab bars.
- Remove area rugs.
- Keep cords and clutter out of the way.
- Keep chairs pushed in and cabinets and doors fully closed.
- Secure tall and heavy furniture with furniture straps.
- Look out for uneven flooring.
- Install handrails and grab bars where necessary, such as the stairway and bathrooms.

Transportation can also present unique safety challenges. When riding in a vehicle, special needs children can generally be transported with the use of standard child restraint devices and this is the preferable choice. If necessary and a conventional restraint does not meet a child's positioning needs and proper use of the restraint is compromised then a specialized restraint should be considered. Car safety seats with five-point harnesses anchored at both shoulders, both hips, and between the legs, can be adjusted to provide good upper torso support for many children with special needs. In some cases, having a person ride in the seat next to the child may be necessary.

These are just a few areas in which safety can become a concern for all parents. These tips are to help you keep your child with special needs safe and are by no means all inclusive. Planning ahead and a few precautionary measures can make all the difference in the safety of your special child. Remember, safety should always come first.

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